

The CEA Forum

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[Next: What Can They Do with an English Major?](#)

ADVISING UNDERGRADUATES CONSIDERING GRADUATE WORK IN ENGLISH

[Michael West](#)



During my first decade of college teaching spent at Harvard and Wesleyan I often wrote letters recommending students from those relatively prestigious institutions for graduate English programs. Upon moving to the University of Pittsburgh, however, I did so less frequently for two decades, partly because much of my teaching focused either on graduate seminars or courses oriented toward non-majors. But about two decades ago when I became more deeply involved in our undergraduate major, I found myself again being asked for recommendations from students and advice about where to apply. And increasingly I felt uncertain about what advice to give undergraduates applying from a solid state-related university but without the cachet of an Ivy or a potted-Ivy degree.

Fifteen years ago matters came to a head when I encouraged a strong student I'd been working with to think that she would have a fair choice of teaching assistantships by applying to her favored M.A. programs at Georgetown, Notre Dame, Tufts, Arizona, UC Santa Barbara, UMass Amherst, SUNY Stony Brook, and Alabama. A magna double major in English literature and Art History with two years of college German, her GRE scores were 80th percentile verbal, 35th percentile subject; pointing toward Renaissance studies, she had a decent but not overwhelming application essay on Whitman. She was sorely disappointed when only her anchor school Alabama offered her a TA—and I was chagrined to think that I might have contributed to her disappointment by encouraging unrealistic ambitions. After she distinguished herself at Alabama it became clear that her ambitions were not unrealistic but had been hampered by so-so GRE scores and the fact that as a senior she authored prize-winning essays too late to be included in her application. Reapplying more widely to doctoral programs three years later with her prize essays on record, GRE scores jacked by cramming (99th percentile verbal, 80th percentile subject), and a publication in an online Shakespeare journal to her credit, she was rejected by U Pennsylvania, Illinois/Chicago, Stanford, and Brown, but showered with offers of TFs by several strong schools (Rochester, Colorado, Wisconsin, Penn State) as well as lucrative honorary fellowships from Northwestern, Vanderbilt, and Maryland—programs ranked more highly than most that had initially rejected her.

But those rejections prodded me to educate myself more thoroughly about the entire application process in order to improve my advice to undergraduates considering graduate school. So I not only volunteered to serve on our department's graduate admissions committee but began collecting information from Pitt students. To do so I devised the following questionnaire and distributed it to every Pitt senior I could contact who applied to graduate programs in English.

The Questionnaire

On behalf of the English Department let me extend congratulations on your recent acceptance[s] to graduate programs!

For some while the department has felt that we could do a better job of advising applicants to graduate schools if we kept better records of where past applicants with specific credentials have and have not been successful. It would be extremely helpful to your fellow students in the future if you would take a moment to share with me the following information. If willing to have it shared for counseling majors and department personnel, please initial here. _____

Your GPA in the major? Your university GPA?

Your GRE scores (by percentile if possible): verbal / quantitative / analytical / writing / subject.

Your foreign language preparation?

Length and nature of your writing sample (was it a footnoted research paper or not)?

Accomplishments that may have made your application esp. strong (publication, undergraduate teaching experience, prizes, etc.)?

In retrospect what aspects, if any, do you suspect were your application's chief weaknesses?

Programs that accepted you with financial support and how much?

Programs that accepted you without funding?

Programs that rejected you?

On the reverse side please offer whatever advice you wish to Pitt students applying to grad programs in English/Film or to faculty advising them. Any suggestions for improving counseling to our majors applying to graduate schools would be most welcome. Return this form to Professor Michael West, English Dept. CL 526, University of Pittsburgh, Pgh. PA 15260. Including your e-mail address here may facilitate future communication:

Moreover as part of my effort to gather information I've since served as a departmental advisor and resource person for students at all levels considering graduate work in English.

The Document: "Advice to Students Considering Graduate Work in English"

After ten years I composed a 30-page document entitled "Advice to Students Considering Graduate Work in English." Drawing on the case histories of about 30 Pitt applicants plus my experience counseling many others who never applied, it explained as clearly and specifically as possible just how the process for selecting future generations of college English professors works. It suggested how best to use an English major or other majors to get the liberal education most valued by graduate English programs. Recommending strategies for maximizing the success of applications, it illustrated them by using detailed anecdotal evidence to compare the results for different Pitt applicants with specific credentials applying to specific graduate programs with differing degrees of selectivity. This feature proved especially helpful in helping Pitt students gauge their credentials (as measured by grades, GRE scores, foreign language background, prize-winning essays, and other specific criteria) against the results for individual applicants with superior, inferior, and comparable credentials. Though departments are ready to trumpet the successes of their applicants, they're generally less eager to publicize their students' failures; yet detailed information about what programs have rejected a department's graduates with specific credentials is essential not only to students trying to figure out where to apply but to faculty members responsible for counseling them. It's my impression that many faculty (as was the case with me for decades) counsel too few applicants to have as reliable a template as might be desired for estimating the qualifications required for admission to graduate programs at various levels.

After soliciting feedback on this document from my department's 50-odd tenure-stream members and making some minor revisions in the light of their suggestions, I posted it on the internet in 2004. A few students from other schools who Googled the document began consulting me by email about where to apply on the basis of their records. Thus I was able to enlarge my database slightly beyond the experiences of Pitt undergraduates and produce expanded versions of the document. Running 50-odd pages, the current version draws on questionnaires returned by about 50 undergraduate applicants, including half a dozen from other schools. Broken down into the following sections, my online advice may be consulted [here](#).

1. What is this document?
2. When should I start thinking about graduate school?
3. What preparation are graduate programs generally looking for?
4. Must I major in English if I plan to do graduate work in English?
5. What are career prospects for holders of graduate degrees in English?
6. How can graduate school be financed?
7. To which graduate programs should I consider applying?
8. How should I handle the application writing sample?
9. How should I handle the GRE exams?
10. How should I handle the application's personal statement?
11. How should I handle soliciting letters of recommendation?
12. How should I respond to multiple offers of admission? to unanimous rejection?
13. Once in graduate school how can I maximize my career prospects?
14. What different approaches do graduate degrees in writing demand?
15. What different approaches do graduate degrees in film demand?
16. What different approaches do graduate degrees in education demand?
17. Case Histories of Graduate Applicants 2004-2005
18. Case Histories of Graduate Applicants 2005-2006
19. Case Histories of Graduate Applicants 2006-2007
20. Case Histories of Graduate Applicants 2007-2008
21. Case Histories of Graduate Applicants 2008-2009
22. Case Histories of Students Who Left Graduate English Studies for Various Reasons

As further evidence accumulates, I hope to continue producing revised versions in the future, and I welcome suggestions for improvement.

Some Concluding Remarks

Although there are some references to Pitt's curriculum and departmental life, effusively grateful responses from students at other schools leave no doubt that it's proved helpful beyond the boundaries of my home institution. Faculty elsewhere responsible for counseling aspirants to graduate English programs will find in it the distillation of my last seventeen years experience in the job. I hope what I've written constitutes frank, hard-headed advice to undergraduates who despite impressive general intelligence often lack detailed knowledge of how academia actually works—knowledge that sophisticated faculty advisors may take for granted.

It's not without limitations, of course. Since most of my questionnaires came from students applying to graduate

programs in English literature, I can't draw on equally extensive evidence from applicants to MFA programs, film programs, or secondary education programs. So MA/PhD programs in literature serve as the focus of my advice, with separate sections that try to sketch how that advice may need to be modified for students applying in those related fields. One important goal was to give a sense of how much money different applicants might expect from different schools. But though the ways in which students' credentials are measured remain roughly constant from one year to the next, dollar amounts do not. Rather than labor to quote fellowship awards in constant dollars, I've simply stated the year of any award and hoped that with due warning students and their advisors can make the necessary adjustments for inflation in comparing awards to two students applying in different years. One credential that plays a crucial role in application outcomes is the writing sample, and it's not always possible to be so objective in describing its quality as in listing test scores—especially if I have not seen it, as is usually the case with students from other schools. In characterizing writing samples I've tried to indicate their quality as best I could, and have often been able to draw on more objective evidence like whether or not the papers won departmental prizes; but this is perhaps the variable that is hardest to pinpoint the quality of.

In some respects my advice reflects views that not all faculty may agree with. For example, I strongly encourage students with an interest in English literature to study literature in some foreign language or languages beyond the intermediate level in college, while others may be satisfied with the lower goal of simply preparing oneself to pass Ph.D. language exams. My reasons for valuing more advanced study in foreign languages are shared by many if not all on graduate admissions committees, and my document explains them at length. Moreover anyone who reads the document can gauge from the case studies cited the extent to which students who follow this advice reap rewards in graduate admissions.

But while I hope my advice reflects a substantial professional consensus on many issues, doubtless other faculty will disagree on particular points. That is natural and hardly to be lamented. As I carefully explain, students can make the best decision about graduate work by consulting several faculty whom they trust and then trying to synthesize conflicting opinions themselves. My opinions merit careful attention, but in the last analysis they are the opinions of one especially well-informed professor and not necessarily advice that all other faculty would endorse in every respect. Indeed, any document that tried to achieve complete consensus on all these issues could only do so by lapsing into bland vagueness that would not help anyone much. Official statements on this subject—both departmental and professional—are not without value, but a committee viewpoint founded on compromises can enforce a certain wishy-washy nebulousness. If you sample my document, you will encounter a personal voice, I trust, and quite specific advice illustrated by scads of concrete examples.

Professor of English at the University of Pittsburgh, **Michael West** has published numerous articles, reviews and verse translations. Among other honors his book *Transcendental Wordplay* (2000) won Phi Beta Kappa's Christian Gauss award as the best work of scholarly criticism published that year on any literary topic; his teaching awards include the ADE-MLA Certificate of Excellence in Teaching English and a Trollope Prize for curricular innovation. His CV, address, and teaching and intellectual interests may be found [here](#).



Return to [Table of Contents](#)

[Next: What Can They Do with an English Major?](#)